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ABSTRACT

Although written and oral criticism of a speech may help a student become aware of his mistakes and a tape recording may let him hear them, both techniques deal with past experiences. They make the student aware of what he did say, but not of what he is saying at the moment. Interjecting comments and criticisms while a student is speaking assists the student in learning to adapt to adverse speaking situations and in overcoming initial nervousness. This technique is also intended to make the student immediately cognizant of flaws in the structure and organization of his speech. Caution must be exercised in employing this technique. "Heckling" or interrupting certain students results in a loss of concentration and even in antagonism toward the teacher from other class members. Generally speaking, however, this technique assists teachers in developing better speakers. (EE)

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DON'T HESITATE TO HECKLE YOUR SPEECH STUDENTS!

J. F. Peirce

More and more over the years I've discovered the benefits of interrupting my students while they're speaking. I refer to these interruptions as a teaching technique. My students call it heckling. At times it is. But usually it's a means to an end: to helping the student overcome his nervousness, to improving his delivery, to correcting his errors in content, language, and organization, or to challenging him to think on his feet.

While written and oral criticism following a speech may make a student aware of his mistakes and while a tape recording may let him hear them, they both have the same weakness. They're past history. They make him aware only of what he has done, not what he is doing. Therefore, I supplement written and oral criticism with corrections, comments, and questions while the student is speaking--in order to make him aware of what he's doing, while he's doing it.

At times I even have the student cup his hands, press them against his head, and then push his ears forward, so that when he speaks, he becomes aware of what he's saying and the way he's saying it by being made conscious of his own voice.

Naturally he doesn't hear his true voice quality, and he may be embarrassed by having to assume this unnatural position, but in most

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cases he will forget his embarrassment in concentrating on his speaking. He will hear what he's saying and the way he's saying it, and if he has any kind of an ear for language and the rhythm of speech, he'll tend to correct his mistakes as he speaks.

I don't pretend that interrupting a speaker is a panacea for all of the ills of student speaking, and I warn you that that there are dangers inherent in its use. Too many interruptions may cause the speaker to lose his concentration and the audience to lose the thread of his speech. As a result, the speaker may become angry and frustrated by your interruptions. If you have a tendency to sarcasm, you'll need to keep it under tight control. If you are overly zealous, you may interrupt every time a student makes a mistake and give the impression that you're a show-off or a petty tyrant. Don't correct all of his mistakes--just the important ones! But like most things, this is easier said than done.

Be sure to make the purpose of your interruptions clear, either at the time of the interruption or at the end of the speech. If your reason for interrupting is not made clear, the student may not realize what he was doing wrong and how your interruption helped him to correct his mistake--<u>if</u> it did. Otherwise your interruption may result only in his anger and frustration.

I once asked a speaker whom I had had to ask continually for qualification why he thought I was interrupting him. "To make a fool of me!" he answered. Without thinking, I retorted: "No. Nature beat me to it!"

Naturally I apologized for my thoughtless remark, but the dam-

age was done. I don't know if the student ever forgave me for the cheap laugh I got at his expense, but I know I've never forgiven myself. Such a reply can be a traumatic experience for a young speaker, especially one who is shy or nervous. But if this technique is used wisely, it can help you achieve your best results from just such speakers, for it can help a student overcome his nervousness.

In the introductory lecture to my course, I prepare my students for being interrupted and tell them what I hope to accomplish with this technique. I also tell them that if they are bothered by it, all they have to do is tell me to shut up, and I will.

Usually when a student is unable to throw off his nervousness during a speech, I will interrupt him with a question--about his subject, his nervousness, or something totally extraneous, hopefully in the latter case to make him laugh to release his tension.

Once, before the start of a class, I asked a particularly nervous student a question about a subject in which I knew he was interested. After we had stood talking together about the subject for a few minutes at the front of the room, I asked him to list its pros and cons on the blackboard, which he did, explaining each point in detail. While he was speaking, the rest of the class filed in, took their seats, and began to listen. At last the student turned to say something to me directly and, seeing the class, realized what had happened. A smile split his face and he said: "Look, Ma! I'm talkin'!" After that he had almost no trouble with nervousness again.

Another student was so nervous that I had to seat him at my desk, prop him up, and then ask him questions that he could answer yes or no in order to get him to speak. After a bit, I asked him questions that called for more detailed answers, and once he could handle them, I promoted him to sitting on the side of the desk and then to leaning against the front of it. After he overcame his nervousness, he became one of the best speakers I've ever had.

Normally, when I ask questions of a nervous speaker, I try to get him to concentrate on me--as if we were alone, carrying on a private conversation. This may enable him to forget his nervousness and help him when he continues to speak.

Setting up a conversational situation can help a speaker overcome a monotonous delivery or a mechanical speech pattern as well. If a student tends to...pause...between...almost...each...and... every...word, I may ask him for further explanation, even though what he has said was perfectly clear. Getting him to talk to me may aid him to speak more fluently, and this fluency may carry over to his speaking when he continues his speech.

Unfortunately there isn't always a carry over, and at times a student will have difficulty talking to me; in which case, I may ask him to talk to a friend or an acquaintance in the class. This may help him because the person he's talking to isn't criticizing or grading him. Seeing a teacher writing a critique of his speech may unnerve a speaker. Therefore, I make it a point never to write while talking to a speaker and to give him my undivided attention.

I never hesitate to criticize a student, even harshly if need

be, however, to let him know that I think speech is important and that I care about what he says and how he says it. I once participated in an experiment in which freshmen themes were criticized orally, using a tape recorder instead of conventional marking. When I played back my critiques of my students' papers, I was horrified to hear them given in a querulous tone of voice. I would have retaped them, but I didn't have time, so I let the students hear the critiques as I'd recorded them. To my amazement, none of the students objected to my tone of voice, and one of them came to me after listening to his tape and in a subdued manner said: "Sir, I didn't know you cared!"

Let your students know that you do care, not only about the English language and how they misuse and abuse it, but that you care about them as well. However, don't hesitate to antagonize them if that's the only way you can get them to speak up and defend their ideas. Antagonizing a student can serve a number of purposes. It can result in his speaking more loudly, forcefully, and fluently and, therefore, more effectively. It can cause him to forget his nervousness because of his need to "tell you off"--to show you that he knows what he's talking about.

But in the end you must let him know what you were trying to do. Otherwise he may keep his anger "boiling on the back burner" for the rest of the semester, and you will have hurt, not helped him. Therefore, you must be able to judge when and when not to antagonize a student.

Angering your students has to be done with care, but there are

certain classes of students that I deliberatley try to make angry. If a student tells me that he plans to become a teacher, a minister, or a salesman, I'll do everything I can to make him "lose his cool," since he must learn to handle people and situations without losing his temper. Though I don't tell these students in advance what I'm trying to do, once again I never fail to make clear at the end of their speech what my purpose was in trying to make them angry and why it's important to them to control their tempers. Of course, if a student does lose his temper and becomes angry with me, I don't hold it against him. Sometimes I even let such students get back at me. I go to the front of the room, let them give me a subject on which I'm qualified to talk, and then let them heckle me while I'm speaking. Try it! You may not like it. But if you can make them listen <u>without</u> heckling you--you know that you've got it made.

As one result of heckling your students, you may antagonize the audience as well as the speaker. I once had a student who gave a speech for which he was obviously ill prepared. I'd had him in another course and knew the quality of work of which he was capable, so when he didn't perform up to the level of his ability, I gave him a bad time. He accepted my criticism in the spirit in which it was intended and wasn't upset with me but with himself because of his poor performance. But another student sitting across the aisle from me didn't take it kindly. I could feel the waves of his anger float across the aisle to me. At last, unable to restrain himself any longer, he blurted out: "What would you do if he told you to shut up?"

"He doesn't dare tell me to shut up when he's not prepared," I answered. "But he can shut me up--by talking sense, by arousing my interest and then satisfying it."

A year later, the young man who'd been speaking dropped by my office to tell me that he'd just come from giving a report in a seminar, during which both the faculty and his fellow students had tried to give him a hard time. "They didn't bother me in the least," he said, grinning. "You gave me a lot harder times than they could possibly give me."

I've had other students who resented my "heckling" when they were in my classes stop by to thank me later, after being examined orally for admission to medical or dental school or after being interviewed for a job--because they'd been at ease and able to think and talk on their feet.

Interrupting your students is an excellent way to make them think on their feet. I will often stop a speaker and ask him three or four quick questions to see how he handles them. The student has to decide which questions need to be answered and in what order. And he has to make a mental note of where he left-off speaking so that he can slip back into his speech unobtrusively once the questions have been answered.

It's an excellent technique to use with superior students--to challenge them to the utmost of their ability. Once they've proved that they can handle such situations, they have increased confidence in their ability to handle other situations.

At times, however, such questioning reveals that the student is merely glib or that he's memorized his speech and doesn't really

understand his subject. I had a student in class last fall who seemed perfectly poised as he spoke. Finding a suitable opening, I asked him three quick questions, and to my horror he "came apart at the seams." I tried to repair the damage, to sew him back together, but succeeded only in shaking him up all the more. What had started out as an "A" speech ended as a "C-" speech at best.

After class, I apologized to the student and promised not to interrupt him again. To my surprise, he objected. "Give me as much trouble as you can," he said. "I'm going into the Marines at the end of the semester. I'm going to have to control men. Obviously I can't even control myself. I'll need all the help you can give me, so please interrupt me!"

I first began interrupting my students about fifteen years ago. At the time, I was a member of a club that had relatively little business to transact and most of that quite simple. But each time before the club voted on a motion, even though the point under consideration would appear to be obvious, one particular member would ask for a clarification of the motion, then say: "Now as I understand the motion it means--" and go on to explain it. All of the time he was speaking, I would fret over what I considered to be a needless delay.

Then during one of these "needless delays," a point that was "completely obvious" turned out not to be so obvious after all. I had completely misunderstood the intent of the motion as had most of the rest of the members of the club. When we realized what we were voting on, we quickly voted it down--even though only moments before we had

been anxious to vote for it.

After that, I realized that my fellow member wasn't the self-important fool I'd supposed him to be, that he was willing to appear stupid so that those of us who were wouldn't vote on a motion we didn't understand. I realized that instead of shutting off debate, we needed to ask questions--obtain a fuller explanation of what we were committing ourselves to do.

From then on, I began to listen to my students more carefully. If I didn't understand them or if what they said could be misinterpreted, I would ask them to give a more careful explanation. Even if I understood something, I would often deliberately mininterpret what was said to make the student see that his language was poor or that he'd failed to qualify his point completely. Of course, at times I've discovered to my embarrassment that my "misinterpretation" wasn't a misinterpretation but what the student had actually intended.

Such interruptions, however, can show a speaker not only that he has given insufficient information but that his speech is poorly organized as well. Many times I've asked students for qualification only to have them say: "I'm going to bring that out later" or "That's not important." To which I reply: "But it is! You've got to tell us now, or you may not have an audience later on. You've aroused our interest without satisfying it. You've misdirected our attention. We may try to puzzle out what you've said unless you tell us what we want to know or unless you tell us now, without being asked, that this point will be explained later in your speech."

In addition, interruptions will enable you to correct errors that the student has made in content and language--in the facts he has presented and in his pronunciation, grammar, and diction.

Calling attention to his errors may at first make him more nervous, but he'll be better able to correct his mistakes and thus speak more effectively.

At the same time you can point out errors in his physical presentation--in his posture and the way he handles visual aids. Pointing out specific errors is the best way to lead him into conversation to help him correct not only his mistakes but his poor delivery and his nervousness as well.

So don't hesitate to heckle your students. Your heckling may not always achieve successful results, but more often than not, it may help you to develop your students into better speakers.